

STATINTL

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Clifford's Assignment: 'Give Me the Lesser of Evils'

This is the 10th of 15 excerpts from former President Johnson's book, "The Vantage Point," an account of his presidency, to be published shortly.

"THE MAKING OF A DECISION" VIETNAM 1967-1968 (Part Two)

The two weeks before and two months following Tet represented a period of activity as intense as any of my Presidency. My advisers and I followed developments in Vietnam on a daily, sometimes hourly, basis.

I had decided by this time to send General Wheeler to Saigon for consultations with Bunker and Westmoreland. I thought we would benefit from a full assessment by this level-headed and experienced soldier. I asked him to go over the entire situation with Westmoreland and to form his own judgment of what should be done. I instructed him to find out what Westmoreland felt he had to have to meet present needs, and what he thought future needs would be for troops, equipment, or other support. Finally, I wanted Wheeler to find out how the South Vietnamese army was performing and what additional help we could provide to enable it to fight more effectively and improve more rapidly.

Wheeler and Westmoreland undoubtedly presumed that a large buildup of our armed forces was possible, if not likely. They also anticipated a high-level review of our war strategy. This had influenced their suggestions as to what could be done to strengthen our position in Vietnam.

Their preliminary proposal was that we consider assigning about 100,000 men over the next two months, prepare another 42,000 by September, and program a final group of 55,000 by the end of 1968. The total to be readied for possible assignment was slightly more than 205,000.

At the February 27 meeting McNamara presented three options for consideration. One was to accept the Wheeler-Westmoreland proposal. This would require an increase in military strength of about 400,000 men, he said, and an expenditure of an additional \$10 billion in fiscal 1969. The second option was to combine the military increase with a new peace initiative. At

that point Rusk stated that if we made a peace proposal, it should be specific. He suggested that we might stop bombing at the 20th parallel, or stop bombing altogether if Hanoi would withdraw military forces from Quang Tri province, just below the DMZ. McNamara's third option was to maintain the status quo on troop commitments and change our strategy, protecting only "essential" areas and reducing offensive operations in unpopulated regions.

I returned to Washington at 2 a.m. on February 28. Wheeler arrived from Saigon four hours later, and we met for breakfast.

It was Wheeler's judgment that Westmoreland needed a reserve force of "about two divisions." He recommended that we seriously consider the three-phase increase he and Westmoreland had worked out.

I asked Secretary McNamara how we could raise the troops to meet the Wheeler-Westmoreland proposal, if we decided to do so. McNamara said that we would have to call up about 250,000 reserves for all services, mostly for the Army. We would have to extend enlistments by six months for men already in service. He estimated that we would have to increase our budget by \$10 billion in 1969 and by \$15 billion in 1970. I asked him whether he accepted the forecast that we would have to expect to give up territory if we did not send men in the numbers being discussed. McNamara said he disagreed. He thought that adding 200,000 men would not make a major difference, since the North Vietnamese would probably add men to meet our increase. He believed that the key was the South Vietnamese army—how fast it could be expanded and how well it would fight.

I told my advisers that I was not prepared to make any judgment at that time. We needed answers to many questions. I asked Clark Clifford to head a group to consider these demanding problems. The last thing I said was: "Give me the lesser of evils. Give me your recommendations."

I know that one of the first things the Clifford group had done was to make a sharp distinction between present needs and capabilities and the longer-run question of strengthening our overall military position during the next year. The full report I received at the meeting of March 4 made that distinction clear. A copy of the

group's written report was distributed to everyone at the table. The report first described the Wheeler-Westmoreland proposal for troop increases and Wheeler's suggestions for building up our strategic reserves at home. By calling up reserves, increasing draft calls, and extending terms of service, the total package would have increased our armed forces by 511,000 men by June 30, 1969.

The Clifford group recommended: an immediate decision to send approximately 23,000 additional men to Vietnam; a strong representation to the South Vietnamese urging them to improve their performance; early approval of a reserve call-up of about 245,000 men; reserving judgment on the total 205,000 package and examination of requirements "week by week"; an in-depth study of possible new "political and strategic guidance" for our operations in Vietnam and of our overall Vietnam policy; "no new peace initiative on Vietnam."

On bombing policy, opinions in the Clifford group were divided. Some wanted a "substantial extension of targets and authority" including mining Haiphong harbor; others proposed only a "seasonal step-up through the spring," without new targets.

The report and its attachments addressed the various questions I had raised in my directive of February 28. Some questions were answered in detail; others required additional study and analysis. As I read the Clifford group's report and its attachments and listened to the discussion around the Cabinet table, I detected among a few advisers a sense of pessimism far deeper than I myself felt. I had much greater confidence in Westmoreland and his staff in Vietnam than many people in Washington, especially Pentagon civilians. I also had more confidence in the ability and determination of the South Vietnamese people to defend themselves. On the other hand, I was deeply conscious of the growing criticism we were receiving from the press and from some vocal citizens.

The aspect of the Clifford group's report that troubled me most was its totally negative approach to any possible negotiations. On the basis of remarks made earlier by Rusk, McNamara, and others, and knowing the opinions held by various civilians in the Pentagon

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